

1927
to
1934



Violin
JAZZ



JOE VENUTI

JOE VENUTI

1927 to 1934 Violin JAZZ

Once renowned primarily as a screwball whose practical jokes and impractical tantrums made him the Peck's bad boy of jazz, Joe Venuti is revered in retrospect as the first and perhaps greatest jazz violinist, history's equivalent of his close associate Eddie Lang (the subject of Yazoo 1059). But whereas jazz guitar has taken several dramatic directions since Lang popularized it, jazz violin has only recently developed beyond the musical parameters Venuti established for it. Even as the musical era he embodied grows increasingly remote his performances still command attention, not only as historic milestones, but as aesthetic ones. It seems impossible to improve upon his playing, though Venuti himself is still attempting to, at the age of seventy-five.

Venuti's superb technique and overall finesse attest to his youthful classical training, an anomaly for any jazzman of his era. At an early age his parents (who were aboard a ship traveling from Italy to America when he was born, in 1903) groomed him to become a professional violinist. His boyhood tutor was a once popular concert performer in his native Philadelphia, Thaddeus Rich. His classical technique remained good enough for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra to offer him a position in 1924, reports Richard DuPage, who remains the best source of information on Venuti. On jazz recordings Venuti's training (coupled with arduous practice and obvious natural ability) would be reflected in his flawless intonation, his ability to perform in any key, and his penchant for four string violin chords, such as might grace a Bach sonata, but are ordinarily beyond the competence of a pop or folk violinist. (To effect them Venuti turned his bow upside down and sounded strings between the hair and wood of the bow.) Venuti's early association with Eddie Lang proved at least as decisive as his formal training.

They met as grade school students around 1915, and began teaming professionally some three years later when Venuti, as a fifteen-year-old, began working as part of a local cafe trio. Once Lang joined the group they became inseparable musical partners, serenading neighbors and neighborhood luminaries (such as policemen, firemen, and politicians) with an assortment of classics, semi-classics, arias, and Italian dance tunes during their off-hours. By this time early jazz recordings were rapidly revolutionizing American music, and the pair fell readily into the trend of jazzing anything jazzable. "We used to play a lot of mazurkas and polkas," Venuti later recalled. "Just for fun we started to play them in 4/4 time...Then we started to slip in some improvised passages."

Though Lang's career was based largely in Philadelphia over the next six years, Venuti quickly established himself as a freelance band musician of national repute. Between 1919 and 1923 he worked as part of Burt Eslow's quintet in an Atlantic City hotel. After a two month stint with Red Nichols, he joined the Detroit-based Jean Goldkette band (a fourteen piece dance orchestra that numbered the Dorsey brothers among its members) in April of 1924. Between 1925 and mid-1926 he frequently recorded as part of a Goldkette ensemble, and worked as the leader of various Goldkette-directed bands. The summer of 1926 found him leading a septet featuring Lang in Atlantic City's Silver Slipper nightclub; its memorized repertoire consisted of some two hundred tunes. That fall Venuti opened at a fashionable Manhattan nightclub (Tommy Guinan's) with a combo that included Lang, Jimmy Dorsey, Nichols, and pianist Frank Signorelli, an alumnus of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. During this period Venuti and Lang (buttressed by Signorelli and others) first appeared as a recording duo.

Venuti and Lang remained at the top of their profession until Lang's premature death in 1933 ended one of jazz's most fruitful and fateful associations. Though Venuti afterwards recorded with Carl Kress, Dick McDonough, and Frank Victor, he was never involved in a continuous partnership with another guitarist, or any other musician. Perhaps unfairly, his commercial impact greatly diminished in the years following Lang's death. Nevertheless, a big band he organized in 1935 remained active until the Second World War. After perhaps two decades of obscurity, he re-emerged in his present role as a jazz eminence, working club dates. The present-day Venuti is still an inventive musician who is likely to perform anything from jazz standards to the Beatles' *Yesterday*.

In Venuti's heyday jazz was not so much a genre with its own established repertoire as a style of arrangement and musician expression, a characteristic it retains to this day. While its change of focus from composition to performance is now basic to pop music, it was Tin Pan Alley that provided most of the day's popular fare during Venuti's early years, and performers like Venuti who treated sheet music purely as a source of inspiration. Any popular idiom was a valid point of departure; he recorded not only original compositions, but Tin Pan Alley tunes like *Apple Blossoms* and *Hiawatha's Lullaby*, blues (such as the previously unissued take of

Side 1

Sensation (1928) *

Joe Venuti, *violin*; Jimmy Dorsey, *clarinet, alto sax, baritone sax*; Rube Bloom, *vocal, piano*; Eddie Lang, *guitar*; poss. Justin Ring, *drums*.

Apple Blossoms (1929) *

Joe Venuti, *violin*; Frankie Trumbauer, *C-melody sax, bassoon*; Eddie Lang, *guitar*; Lennie Hayton, *piano, celeste*.

Raggin' The Scale (404005-C)(1930) *

Joe Venuti, *violin*; Adrian Rollini, *bass sax*; Itzy Riskin, *piano*; Eddie Lang, *guitar*.

Satan's Holiday (1934)

Joe Venuti, *violin*; Don Barrigo, *tenor sax*; Arthur Young, *piano*; Frank Victor, *guitar*; Doug Lees, *string bass*.

A Mug Of Ale (1927) *

Joe Venuti, *violin*; Adrian Rollini, *bass sax, goofus*; Arthur Schutt, *piano*; Eddie Lang, *guitar*.

Hey! Young Fella (take 1)(1933)

Joe Venuti, *violin*; Jimmy Dorsey, *trumpet, clarinet, alto sax*; Adrian Rollini, *bass sax, vibraphone*; Phil Wall, *piano*; Eddie Lang, *guitar*.

Wild Cat (take 3)(1928)

Joe Venuti, *violin*; Eddie Lang, *guitar*; Frank Signorelli, *piano*.

Side 2

The Wild Dog (1930)

Joe Venuti, *violin*; Pete Pumiglio, *baritone sax*; Frank Signorelli, *piano*; Eddie Lang, *guitar*.

Sweet Lorraine (1933)

Joe Venuti, *violin*; Benny Goodman, *clarinet*; Bud Freeman, *tenor sax*; Adrian Rollini, *bass sax*; Joe Sullivan, *piano*; Dick McDonough, *guitar*; Neil Marshall, *drums*.

Kickin' The Cat (1927) *

Joe Venuti, *violin*; Adrian Rollini, *bass sax, goofus, hot fountain pen*; Arthur Schutt, *piano*; Eddie Lang, *guitar*.

Jig Saw Puzzle Blues (take 1)(1933)

Joe Venuti, *violin*; Jimmy Dorsey, *trumpet, clarinet, alto sax*; Adrian Rollini, *bass sax, vibraphone*; Phil Wall, *piano*; Eddie Lang, *guitar*.

Hiawatha's Lullaby (1933)

Joe Venuti, *violin*; Jimmy Dorsey, *trumpet, clarinet, alto sax*; Adrian Rollini, *bass sax, piano*; Phil Wall, *piano*; Dick McDonough, *guitar*; unknown *vocal*.

Four String Joe (1927) *

Joe Venuti, *violin*; Don Murray, *clarinet, baritone sax*; Frank Signorelli, *piano*; Eddie Lang, *guitar*; Justin Ring, *cymbal*.

Goin' Places (1927) *

Joe Venuti, *violin*; Eddie Lang, *guitar*.



245 Waverly Place
New York, N.Y. 10014

Cover art: Robert Armstrong
Notes: Steve Calt
Mastering & Production: Nick Perls

We wish to thank Don Kent & Nick Perls for the loan of their rare originals.

SEND FOR A FREE YAZOO CATALOG.
ALL YAZOO LP'S ARE ALWAYS AVAILABLE
BY WRITING TO YAZOO RECORDS

* Reproduced pursuant to express license from Columbia Special Products, CBS Records Division, CBS, Inc.

Jigsaw Puzzle) and ragtime pieces such as *Raggin' The Scale*, the handiwork of pianist Ed Claypoole (and a different version from the one appearing on Venuti's Columbia reissue). Within one tune distinct idioms are freely scrambled, as when Signorelli plays passages evocative of the ragtime tune *Little Rock Getaway* on *Sweet Lorraine*, and Venuti and Lang play a classical-sounding four bar modulation on *Kickin' The Cat*.

Whereas modern jazz is often a form of mood music that allows for thematic development, Venuti and his contemporaries played jazz as a form of dance music, designed typically for hectic Fox Trots or slower One Steps. Many of his pieces take on then-conventional I-VI-II-V pop progressions and have the medley-like quality of ragtime or march pieces, with each eight or sixteen bar section amounting either to a distinct theme or a variation on an initial theme (sometimes distinguished from its predecessor by a simple change of key and instrumentation). The tunes dissolve readily into riffs which are ideally meant to be more arresting than the tunes they are part of.

Along with Eddie Lang, Venuti brought a degree of unparalleled elegance and slickness to a medium that was then distinguished less for its polish than its exuberance. Venuti's playing was at once geared to satisfy the most finicky musical ear, while amusing the most frivolous flapper. For all his instrumental virtuosity, so readily apparent on works like *Wild Cat*, *Four String Joe*, and *Raggin' The Scale*, Venuti never sacrifices the bounciness and light-hearted euphoria essential to Twenties' jazz. In discarding all pretense of solemnity Venuti and his contemporaries perpetuated the emphasis of the ragtime their own specialty replaced, which was the first American musical idiom to make significant (if not deliberate) inroads upon the pomposity, melodrama, sentimentality and even seriousness of pop music. The blend of solid musicianship and hokum Venuti achieves remains exhilarating to this day; in much the fashion of Charles Ives and James Joyce, it confounds conventional distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow art.

Just as Venuti's music seems to obliterate artistic stereotypes, so does it tease the listener with incongruities. His showpiece *Wild Dog*, for example, begins with a scampering rhythm conveyed by ascending triplets played at breakneck tempo; as if this passage is too obvious a suggestion of the title, Venuti soon juxtaposes three languid measures with two played at a furious tempo. Sudden contrasts of tempo, mood, and technique are basic to Venuti's approach, which seems to treat jazz as a music whose purpose is to startle. Like other jazzmen, Venuti does not strive for climactic effects, but laces his music with periodic highlights: it may be the harmonics of *Apple Blossoms*, the eight bar guitar break of *Mug Of Ale*, or the fast-paced musical dialogue between Venuti and Lang occurring in the sixth chorus of *Goin' Places*, in which the two musicians bounce zany phrases off each other for two measures. Since no single passage or solo is given dramatic significance, the listener is free to find its various valleys and plateaus for himself. It was perhaps this aspect of jazz, rather than its improvisation, that made it a unique style of music, and made tyrants of jazz critics, who have never been obliged to determine the intentions of its composers or performers.

Venuti's cleverness as an arranger is evident in his facile manipulation of keys. To accommodate the limitations of his musical partners, various themes found in *Wild Dog* and *Hiawatha's Lullaby* are separated by half steps, with Venuti handling each key with consummate ease. Nor is Venuti bound by orchestral role stereotypes: on a work like *Hey! Young Fella* (a previously unissued test) he is scarcely distinguishable as a soloist, but works in tandem with Jimmy Dorsey, while on pieces like *Goin' Places* and *Wild Cat* he provides continuous lead accompaniment. He can just as readily play back-up with block chords in the fashion of a pianist, as he does on *Four String Joe*. His solo work often bears a decided stamp of horn phrasing and accenting. His pianist Frank Signorelli is particularly interesting for the stride piano style he displays on *Sensation* and the boogie feel he attains on *Mug Of Ale*.

If you enjoyed this album consider Yazoo 1059, Eddie Lang, as related material.





L-1062

SIDE A

JOE VENUTI: Violin Jazz

Sensation*
Apple Blossoms*
Raggin' The Scale*
Satan's Holiday
A Mug Of Ale*
Hey! Young Fella
Wild Cat

© Courtesy CBS Records, Inc.

Yazoo



L-1062

SIDE B

JOE VENUTI: Violin Jazz

- The Wild Dog
- Sweet Lorraine
- Kickin' The Cat*
- Jig Saw Puzzle Blues
- Hiawatha's Lullaby
- Four String Joe*
- Goin' Places*

*Courtesy CBS Records, Inc.

Yazoo

L-1062-B